

Senate Bill 255, House Fish and Game Committee, March 22, 2011

Testimony of Bob Ream, Chair, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission

Mr. Chairman and committee members, I am Bob Ream, Chair, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission. I speak today on behalf of the commission in opposition to SB255. I spent 16 years on House Fish and Game Committee and chaired it twice. I have a great deal of respect for the legislative process and I have tremendous respect for the FWP commission process. I've spent over 40 years working on behalf of the wildlife resource in Montana, as a teacher, researcher, legislator and now as a commissioner.

No other board or commission in Montana makes as many decisions or is under more intense public scrutiny than the FWP commission. Nor does any provide more transparency in the decision making process. We deal with a huge array of, and often conflicting interested parties, all passionate about the resource. As you know from being on this committee, everyone in Montana is an expert on wildlife. We do our best to sort through the input from all these "experts" and FWP staff to make decisions that are biologically sustainable and socially acceptable.

When I first read this bill I thought, why is it even needed? On closer examination it raises more questions than it answers. My main concern is section 1(1). It's titled "Criteria" but there are no criteria, only requirements for a series of statements, impact statements and reports. I believe it adds a whole new level of bureaucracy and additional staffing to an already more than adequate process. Does 1(1)(a) require a whole different statement of intent than those already completed in the FWP big game species management plans and the measurable objectives in those plans? Does 1(1)(c) require a whole new impact statement (environmental, social and economic) beyond those already completed? Does 1(1)(d) require another report beyond the biennial season setting process? On line 22 page 1, the clause "or otherwise relates to" includes almost every commission decision made.

Section 1(2) and (3) have been the requirement for FWP and the commission. All decisions are open for public inspection and are more open than they have ever been, with agendas, minutes, live audio coverage and archived videos of commission meetings. There is a wealth of information posted on-line. We have a minimum of 30 days of public input on each decision. Does Section 1(2) require a whole additional public input process?

From last year's agendas, I counted 150 decisions made by the commission. I've handed out the December 2009 agenda. With one of those, the Deer/Elk/Antelope decision, over 800 individual decisions on 161 hunting districts were made - white-tailed, mule deer, elk, antelope - archery and general, antlerless, etc. FWP held 46 meetings around the state attended by more than 1,100 individuals. Nearly 2,600 additional comments were collected and analyzed by mail and on-line. And we gave 60 days for public input before we made the final decisions on February 11, 2010.

During the past year the public process has become even more transparent with the installation of interactive video at every regional office in the state for every commission meeting. Montana sportsmen, landowners, and other interested parties no longer have to travel all the way to Helena to present testimony to the commission. We accept public comment from people who simply travel to their regional office to testify to us in Helena, and ask or answer questions. Incidentally, staff from regional offices no longer need to travel to Helena for a mere 10 minute information presentation and questioning by the commission. FWP has already saved thousands of dollars in staff time and travel costs with this system.

A comment on the huge number of fish and game bills introduced this legislative session - I note that the requirements and criteria set out in SB255 have not been followed for those. Many bills micro-manage the resource, are in clear conflict with the objectives of SB255, and offer far less opportunity for public input than the commission process.

In conclusion, I simply don't see how this bill adds to the effectiveness of FWP and commission management and decision making. Would you rather have us getting the hard work done and making decisions efficiently, or would you rather see us tied up in more process and planning, and writing reports that no one will ever read?

Thank you Mr. Chairman and Committee members.